

# State Populism in Rural Hungary\*

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**ABSTRACT** Our concern in this contribution is to ask what the special features of populism in Hungary are, where government and the largest opposition party can be considered populist. The study aims at analyzing motivations, interests, benefits, and profits of populism in fragile Hungarian regions. The main part examines three peculiar features of state populism: the rural support for stable political and social structures; early-born conservative social policy, which freezes and preserves social inequalities and pacifies social conflicts; and selective social policy that has made a strong difference between “worthy” and “unworthy” poor, thus, contributing to ethnic-based conflicts and emerging prejudice. The Hungarian case shows that poverty and social inequalities, disintegration, hierarchical local power structure with dominance of economic–political oligarchy, weak participation, monopolization of local and non-local media, and racialization of poverty are enabling factors of populism.

## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the causes of rural support for conservative populism, which has been a key feature of government power since 2010, and the consequences of the government programs that raise populist principles. We aim to contribute to research into conservative populism and rurality by analyzing economic, social, and political systems and structures and presenting relevant case studies.

In this respect, our work is unique because Hungary is the first state inside the European Union where a stable governing regime has been created by 21st century conservative populists (Körösenyi and Patkós 2017). That is why we wrote our paper: understanding how conservative populism has been realigned into a state governing system may provide useful lessons for a wider audience.

International literature is increasingly focusing on the expansion of populism in rural areas (Mamonova 2019; Scoones et al. 2018).

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The definition of populism is a controversial issue without consensus so far. In this article, our core goal is to reflect on the specific conditions in Hungary. Thus, we will use the terms “state populism” and “conservative populism,” respectively, to emphasize coercive, disciplinary statehood, and the aspiration to preserve social inequalities.

To our minds, “state populism” indicates that, once in possession of government power, radical right-wing populism is consolidated in the sense of becoming a power system rather than a movement. Its political tools, strategy, and phraseology are no longer about capturing power, but about keeping it. The social base that supported the movement can expand, and radicalism as a fundamental political direction is accompanied by bureaucratic procedures for exercising power. The term conservative populism expresses this change: after basic radical reforms in early years, populist government leaders in order to preserve their power, strive for the stability of political and social systems and structures.

The article is structured as follows. The second section concerns considerations for using the term state populism and the structural roots of rural populism. The research method is the third section. The fourth part offers a brief overview of the political conditions resulting from the economic and social restructuring of rural Hungary. The fifth section presents the main assumptions about the political integration of (rural) society as promoted by state populism, and, using the example of a rural town, demonstrates our main concern: how and why political integration works, i.e., how and why rural people support it. The sixth section presents the populist social policies aimed at preserving social inequities. In the last section, we demonstrate the conflicts in rural society that populist social policies could not alleviate and to which the local politics responded with penal populism and exclusion.

### **State Populism and Rural Support—Theoretical Considerations**

The two main aims of our study are to contribute to the discovery of the nature and consequences of state populism and understanding the causes of rural support for populism. The latest literature on populism, which attempts to clarify the concept, usually concludes that the term is difficult to define (Edelman 2009; Hall 1980, 1985; Scoones et al. 2018; Taggart 2000, 2004). Providing a conceptual foundation is made difficult by the fact that populism is at the same a movement, ideology, political and governance strategy, persuasion, agitation, and engagement (Rancière 2016). As Borrás (2016) states, there are diverse types of populism: actors, interests, and political tendencies internally differentiate populism from right-wing to progressive movements. The active need for

social and political change or the search for the possibility of resistance can make the concept of populism hard to clarify.

Canovan (1982) warned much earlier that the theoretical analysis of populism can be too wide-ranging to be accurate or too narrow to be convincing. She offers a research strategy that results in a descriptive typology. Her typology (1981) distinguishes agrarian and political populism—the state populism that we discuss here would belong to the latter. Agrarian movements have no definite political character and no decisive role in Eastern and Central Europe, despite the fact that the two pre-World War II peasant movements and peasant-based political parties in Hungary had a significant social base and political role. The literature of populism elsewhere tends to focus on the anti-capitalist potential of agricultural movements and food sovereignty (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2015; Borras 2016; Claeys 2012; Claeys and Delgado 2017). In Hungary, populism now does not have the function of changing or counteracting the political and economic order, but rather has become one of the most important tools for maintaining authoritarian power (Körösenyi 2017; Tallár 2017). The strengthening of authoritarian populism has a particularly strong upward trend in Central Eastern Europe (Bugaric and Kuhelj 2018; Butler 2018; Illés et al. 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2018). This is why we believe it is so important to understand the rural dimension to populism's rise to state power. We agree with Scoones et al.'s (2018) statement that we cannot understand the rise of populism in the countryside without paying attention to historical processes and to the redistribution of the social, financial, and natural resources. Influenced by Mamonova's scientific approach (2019) to understanding popular support for authoritarian populism in rural Russia, we assume that the rural success of populism should be better attributed to social and economic structural factors. Mamonova studies three assumptions from the literature on rural support for populism: villagers vote against their own interests and are not sophisticated enough to resist the propaganda; supporters of authoritarian populism are a homogeneous group; and the political economy and structures of domination play a secondary role in understanding this support. These three assumptions indicate that the specialized literature does not pay enough attention to analyzing the political, economic, and social structural reasons for rural support for populism. The search for structural factors seems particularly relevant in a country, Hungary, where populism has already been a feature of the state regime for a decade.

### **Research Method**

The research was carried out using a combined methodology, analyzing semi-structured interviews, public municipal data, municipal documents, and local municipal decrees. We conducted 54 semi-structured interviews with people living in villages, decision makers in the settlements, members of the councils, family helpers, representatives of NGOs, leaders of Roma minority self-governments, and local teachers. For our analysis, we used reports of ombudsman inquiries and the conclusions of academic articles on the subject. We were also present at several local public events. The research was conducted in six counties in the Northern Great Plain and Northern Hungary regions, two of the poorest regions of Hungary. The settlements included in the research were those where, in the period preceding the research, ethnic conflicts, discriminatory local decisions (and nationally notorious ones), and measures to create fear (e.g., spectacular marches by far-right groups) had taken place. In our study, we present and model the case of four of these municipalities: the cases of Gyöngyöspata, Jászladány, Monok, and Érpatak. What is happening here is an excellent symbol of the public mood and the extremist phenomena that have appeared on a massive scale in Hungarian villages. We have been conducting a longitudinal study in Hajdúnánás for two decades, during which 110 interviews have been conducted with farmers, experts, and stakeholders. The political positions of the populist political regime weakened in the 2019 local elections in the big cities, while small towns (e.g., Hajdúnánás, Kiskőrös, and Mélykút) are more the sites of development success. After 2018, the government increased the development amounts for stable right-wing small towns. Hajdúnánás is one of the most spectacular consolidated successes.

We have supported our analysis with the use of statistical data, mainly from local and international databases and from previous quantitative research.<sup>1</sup>

### **Transforming Hungarian Rurality**

The post-socialist restructuring greatly transformed the structure and resources of Hungary's rural economy and society (Csurgó et al. 2018; Kovách 2012). In the years following the change of regime, arable lands that were formerly used by cooperatives and state farms were reprivatized. The implementation of land reform, the abolition of the former state financing of agriculture, and declining agricultural exports led to a

<sup>1</sup>"Land users" research project NKFI OTKA, "Social integration" research project, NKFI OTKA.

deep crisis in the early 1990s (Harcza et al. 1998). Agricultural production fell by 60 percent, while the rapid rise in unemployment triggered the move of the urban poor to the countryside (Szelényi and Ladányi 2006). In 30 years, the population of villages fell by 20 percent, reflecting a series of critical demographic and labor force processes (Brown and Kulcsár 2001; Brown et al. 2005). Despite the unfavorable social and economic trends, the population of villages and small rural towns still jointly account for slightly more than half of the Hungarian population (Csurgó et al. 2018). A rapid concentration of land and land use took place in Hungary prior to accession to EU membership in 2004, becoming one of the most concentrated in Europe (Gonda 2019; Kovách 2016a).<sup>2</sup> Due to the change in the agricultural structure, the decline in rural industry and the migration of the urban poor to the villages, rural unemployment, and poverty are frequently compared to the average of Hungarian national indicators. The poorest remote villages are ghettos of poverty. EU agricultural subsidies, development projects, agricultural modernization, and populist social policy all have reinforced the upper classes of rural society, leading to growing social polarization in rural Hungary (Kovács 2016; Megyesi 2012, 2016). However, the results of parliamentary elections in the countryside do not reflect this division.

In the 2018 Hungarian Parliamentary elections, the conservative, populist party Fidesz won in a coalition with the small Christian Democratic Party. Due to the electoral law, being awarded one-thirds of the votes was enough to provide Fidesz with an absolute parliamentary majority. The populist government acquired more than two-thirds of parliamentary seats for the third time, after 2010 and 2014. There has been no obstacle to the legal establishment of conservative populist economic governance, political system, and social policy since the third government cycle. As the literature points out, populism has a strong willingness to circumvent or capture democratic institutions (Rancière 2016).

As several scholars have noted, it is increasingly common for populism to have strong constituencies in the countryside (Borras 2016; Franquesa 2019; Mamonova 2019; Scoones et al. 2018). In Hungary, the electoral success of conservative populism is largely the result of rural

<sup>2</sup>The number of agricultural producers has decreased to one-third from 1990 to the present. A total of 13,833 production units (2.5 percent of all farms) use three-quarters of all agricultural land (203,274 hectares). A total of 148,000 family farms and nearly 8,000 organizations are active in agricultural production. A total of 114,333 permanent employees and 128,305 temporary laborers are employed in family farms and agro-business organizations (Csurgó et al. 2018). A total of 900,000 households produce food for their own consumption in part-time mini-farms and gardens. Currently, 200,000 families use less than 1 hectare.

votes (Böcskei and Szabó 2018). In the 2018 spring parliamentary elections, populist parties won most rural votes in Hungary: 58 percent of villagers voted Fidesz party, which is much higher than in the cities; in underdeveloped districts, Fidesz took 65 percent of the votes. Most of the supporters of Jobbik, the radical populist party, were small town voters. “It” has been the second largest party in the National Assembly since 2018 (Molnár 2018). The value of the rural votes was significantly increased by the fact that Fidesz suffered significant losses in some of the larger cities in the autumn of 2019 in the local elections, and was particularly weakened in Budapest. The rivalry between the two populist parties for rural supporters brought the success of the ruling party Fidesz, and Jobbik’s social base narrowed and its political influence radically weakened. Fidesz appropriated much of Jobbik’s rhetoric and slogans and incorporated them into its own policy toolbox. In the new phase of social integration/disintegration, the Fidesz government has launched a new development program called “Hungarian Village,” and provided large amounts of development subsidy to small towns with a right-wing majority. While the activities of non-governmental organizations, especially the politically active ones, have been gradually pushed into the background by government regulations, churches are gaining increasing ground in social policy and education. The state has monopolized the rural media, and local cultural and identity policies effectively contribute to maintaining political and social stability. The proportion of rural people in Hungary (and CEE countries) is much higher than in the continent’s core countries. Political elites must always count on this peculiarity. The conservative populist leadership has a rural policy that, according to the logic of power, has successfully solved how to mobilize rural voters, deal with local social conflicts on a political level, and neutralize larger groups who are dissatisfied with developments in the countryside or their own social situation (Gerő and Szabó 2017).

### **Populist Political Integration of Rural Society**

An analysis of social integration in Hungary (Kovács 2017) concluded that models of inequality and stratification and sociodemographic factors do not explain party choices and political values. The structural position of individuals is unable to account for the political behavior, actions, and value orientations of the Hungarian population (Gerő and Szabó 2017; Szabó and Gerő 2015). It is not that the structure and condition of society determines policy, but rather that Fidesz’s conservative populist policy integrates society. By this we mean the performance by prominent actors in politics who shape values through their political communication and power tools, and have an impact on values

and identity, and the integration and disintegration of political communities and value groups. In political integration, the interests of the ruling elites obviously overwrite and mitigate the more appropriate self-organization of society (Szabó and Oross 2016). The alienation of rural people is the result of political disintegration and conscious pacification. Satisfied right wingers are the only homogeneous, internally integrated, outwardly closed, charismatic, leader-oriented community. The greater part of society, disintegrated in political terms, can be pacified by the manipulative of redistribution systems in problematic situations, if necessary. Most of rural society discourse has no definite political content apart from dissatisfaction, which does not create characteristic political communities, and there are no political leaders who would articulate their interests and values (Gerő and Szabó 2017). The rural is far away from policy making.

The populist political leadership also integrates and disintegrates rural society. Through social and development policy, it maintains social, territorial disparities, and amplifies the fragmentation of local societies; thus, generating new conflicts. Village and small town development depends on external project resources, the distribution of which is controlled by political structures. Project-based resource allocations are the most important factor in the economic and political dependence of rural communities and individuals, thus, being a central source of power and control. Welfare spending also strengthens political integration.

These redistributive mechanisms provide many explanations for understanding the political integration of Hungarian rural society. In 2011, a law on independent public employment was passed. Decision makers disconnected public work wages from the minimum wage and its rate dropped by about 20 percent, and also made a material distinction among aid, wages for public work, and income from work (Mózer et al. 2015). As Zsuzsa Ferge puts it (2017), the Hungarian public employment program has been extended uniquely in Europe and even in the world, in terms of the number thus employed, program duration, and budget expenditure. The widening and generalization of “public work” programs<sup>3</sup> became the means of political legitimacy (“work instead of aid”), the vision of a work-based society.

<sup>3</sup>The anti-aid discourses first appeared in local policy arenas and then in the government’s public policy (“Road to public work employment program”) (Zolnay 2012). In 2012, prime minister stated that “our program is to create a work-based society instead of a Western-type welfare state that is not competitive.” This later became a “public work-based society”.



Its other function is to provide a tool and managerial technique for local governments—which had been left alone with their social problems—to regulate the local poor and thereby be able to maintain the apparent social peace (Mózer et al. 2015). The dependency of needy villagers on mayors who distribute and control public work has reinforced the traditional patron–client relationship in rural areas. Public work is a forced labor, a substitute for aid, a punishing and praising tool, but cannot be a modern integration program despite the number of employees involved (Csoba 2010).

The income and consumption of the poor increased to a small extent, but it was enough to get their votes. The lower middle class and poor people also made a rational decision in the 2018 parliamentary elections. The lower two-thirds of rural society voted for state subsidies, assistance, and stability, exclusively represented and symbolized by populist Fidesz in the countryside.

### **Political Integration of Society in a Rural Town: Anatomy of a Success**

We illustrate the top-down political integration of society through the example of Hajdúnánás, a small town of 17,000–18,000 people. In the historical past, the lack of large estates, the large number of small- and medium-sized peasant farms, the small processing industry sector, and the relatively balanced social structure were the hallmarks of the local economy and society. As a result of post-socialist land privatization, 42 percent of the land is currently used by six farms, and 55 percent of the farms above 100 hectares have two-thirds of the land (Kovách 2016b). After the change of regime and economic restructuring (1990–2000), mass poverty appeared, although extreme poverty and social exclusion were never extensive. The social structure was highly segmented by the turn of the millennium and unemployment was already 10 percent by 2010. Fifty percent of the children living in the settlement receive social aid (Franklin et al. 2017). A few years ago, population decline accelerated, with nearly 2,000 fewer inhabitants today than in the early 1990s.

The development of the town is a success story of state populism. After 2010, there was a major shift in local social policies. Poverty alleviation had been unsuccessful in the past. After the shifts of local power leading to the conservative populist majority in the local council, an anti-poverty program was created with the intention of alleviating and managing poverty. Since 2012, within the framework of the START public work program, agricultural production and food processing for social purposes are taking place in the settlement. The Public Work Program, using public project grants, has employed 170–200 people since 2012. The local government also operates its own farm; its produce is sold to public



catering institutions and a canning factory. The Social Land Program, in which 180–200 families produce food on small plots (Csurgó and Kovách 2018; Franklin et al. 2017), complements the Public Work Program. Part of the food for the needy was intended to be obtained through a self-sufficient farming project, which was also seen as a goal and a means of mitigating the consequences of poverty (Franklin et al. 2017). The community land use program can be interpreted as a top-down organized social innovation as opposed to Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucrats, or to Moulaert et al.'s (2005) model of bottom-up social innovation, or even to studies that consider the third or voluntary sector as the main actor in social innovation (Hillier 2013; Pradel Miquel et al. 2013). According to Levesque (2013) and Asztalos Morell (2014), public policy measures can also become a catalyst for social innovation, and Hajdúnánás's story is an example of this.

The municipality possesses the land, and finances the machines, the consultancy, the seedlings, and the seeds. The social land program is an integral part of local social policy. It includes clients from the Family Support Center whose participants are selected according to socioeconomic criteria (large families and low income). The Family Support Center evaluates family applications and decides on their approval. The long-term goal is to reduce the disadvantages and reintegrate the needy population into the labor market. Initially, the local public opinion accepted the program with reservations, although many rejected it, and did not believe it would be successful. Later, this prejudice changed positively, and residents acknowledged the efforts and hard work of the poor. In the inherited peasant mentality, work is appreciated. The independent and voluntary work of the participating poor led to the recognition of their "worthiness." Common land use and joint projects create a community or integrate or reintegrate backward families into the local community. The success of the project has contributed to the consolidation of local power positions. The initiator of the program was the re-elected mayor. Social workers in the land program have become known actors in local political power networks. From 2014, the head of the family care center has been a member of the city council.

The Social Land program creates and reinforces the image of the worthy poor, who can be integrated into the local society, through agricultural work and peasant traditions, while reinforcing the exclusion of the unworthy; those poor people who do not participate in the program. The municipally run land use program is part of a social policy that meets the interests of many social strata. The case presented can be well placed in a model that clearly identifies the interests of the inclusion of a group of poor people in the innovative land use program and the direct and

indirect benefits to the groups involved. The ruling government elite creates political stability through distribution and redistribution systems and pacifies the potentially dissatisfied. The programs make the people in need of food production a social and political client. A significant number of poor groups left out of the program will also be put in a situation of dependency, as they would also enter the beneficiaries. Given the total lack of alternatives, both the worthy and the unworthy are primarily interested in maintaining programs and social order.

This is a top-down bureaucratic system that mobilizes very few administrations, with very few resources and without direct violence, to keep the paupers at the bottom of society. The stability thus maintained is the primary benefit for the ruling elite. The interests of the poor can be attributed to their total vulnerability. A total of 20–25 bags of potatoes from commonly used plots of land or other food somewhat alleviate food shortages. The social recognition of the participants in the program, after a period of opposition and doubt, also creates the illusion of reintegration, which also contributes to the legitimacy and acceptance of the populist system. The local elite helps to legitimize its power positions within poverty programs. The participating poor and those who are eager to participate in the program become clients of the local elite. Ildikó Husz draws attention to the fact that anti-poverty projects often employ members of the middle class of local power groups (Husz 2018). The leadership of the local justify their position by the success of social programs. Social and political stability also serves the property security of the oligarchically intertwined administrative and economic elite. Social integration, of which the pacifiers of the poor are an essential element, corresponds to the interests of most segments in the local society. The indigents receive food or additional income and become accepted (i.e., not discriminated against) members of the local society.

In villages and rural towns, the use of the peasant's past to reproduce local identity is a central factor of political integration (Csurgó 2014). The middle class (and the cultural elite) is actively involved in funding projects for this identitarian recreation. Hajdúnánás has programs to revive peasant traditions, festivals, annual international meetings of Hajdu soldiers, amateur theatrical performances that enhance the peasant past's lifestyles, fine art, and photo exhibitions, middle-class representation balls, outdoor concerts, and a whole series of cultural events accessible to anyone. These events provide the background to cultural integration. Reformed and other churches are permanent participants in cultural and social events. The Calvinists regained their preschool, elementary, and secondary schools. The city center was rebuilt, with several gyms and educational buildings open. Power and cultural integration,

in which anti-poverty programs have an essential practical and symbolic function, are in the interest and benefit of almost all social strata and groups. Conservative populism integrates the local society with exceptional success.

### **Early-Born Conservative Social Policy: Freezing and Preserving Social Inequalities**

In the age of state populism, a rudimentary conservative, welfare regime based on the acceptance of inequalities was introduced. According to Eurostat data for 2016, 3.2 million people in Hungary are at risk of poverty and exclusion; 14 percent of the population are income poor (Gál and Medgyesi 2017). Poverty has been particularly high in villages for decades (Juhász and Molnár 2018) and despite current economic growth, the populist government was not able to change the inequalities and stratification in the countryside. The era of populist governance has further perpetuated the bound social hierarchy in rural society, the poor have a minimal chance of improving their social status; the mobility processes of other social segments are also constrained and this stabilizes rural society at a disadvantage, where the lower third is completely locked in poverty. These policies stiffened the structure of rural society into a pyramid, with the most disadvantaged, large strata below. The structure of land use has essentially shown signs of strong concentration.<sup>4</sup> The number of land users is radically decreasing. The displacement of hundreds of thousands from the agricultural sector is the primary social consequence of land use concentration, which is the principal source of rural poverty.<sup>5</sup> The populist state protects the big land estates<sup>6</sup> and agrarian society is highly polarized.<sup>7</sup>

Unchanging inequality is a direct consequence of conservative ideology and political practice, which does not seek to reduce differences—even

<sup>4</sup>In 2007, farms larger than 50 hectares used 80 percent of the arable land (“Magyarország mezőgazdasága 2013” 2014 (Gazdaság szerkezeti összeírás - előzetes adatok) “Agriculture in Hungary 2013. Agricultural census” KSH. [https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/idoszaki/gsoz/gsoz\\_elozetes\\_2013.pdf](https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/idoszaki/gsoz/gsoz_elozetes_2013.pdf)).

<sup>5</sup>Two decades ago, 1.5 million families were involved in some form of farming, while by 2016, around 1 million left agriculture (Kovács 2016).

<sup>6</sup>A total of 380,000 hectares last state-owned land (about 8 percent of total agricultural area) was sold in 2015–2016 but land auctions (populist “Land for farmers action”) did not reduce the concentration of land use. Although smaller landowners were also granted from state-owned land, the winners of state land sales were the larger farms (Ángyán 2014; Kovács 2016).

<sup>7</sup>A total of 16,000 farms, where only 100,000 employees work, use three-quarters of the agricultural area. In addition to the large owners, the tens of thousands of smaller individual farms and the very small area producers of over 400,000 are the most important groups in the agricultural society.

if the government does not allow too many people to sink too deeply because it needs to maintain political and social stability. The Hungarian conservative, populist state supports property, large land estates, families, the church, orderly organized local communities, the upper middle class, and wealthy social groups. Their stability and security are top political priorities. The middle or upper middle class has been strengthened to the detriment of extended social welfare and human rights (Democracy and Human Rights at Stake in Hungary 2013; Tóth 2017). Most of those in the lower thirds can be easily manipulated or converted into clients. Although there are no signs of it yet, the politically integrated social peace can easily be broken, which is a challenge, both socially and economically, and radicalization can jeopardize political and social systems. The populist state, therefore, seeks to address social tensions and neutralizes the dissatisfaction of the lower strata through a variety of economic and political means of ensuring social and power stability. Examples of this are shown below.

### **Voucher System and the Model in Monok: Social Card**

Voucher systems, by which benefits paid in cash are replaced with vouchers, have been a popular way to regulate the poor in populist Hungary. In Monok, a village of less than 2,000 inhabitants, the mayor introduced a more restrictive form than the usual system of vouchers. It is called the social card, and it has been adopted by 700 villages after Monok introduced it. Beneficiaries receive state subsidies on a social card that can only be used at specific locations for specific products, for example, general food, clothing products, school supplies, cleaning and sanitizing agents, medicine, and firewood. The purchase of alcohol and cigarettes is forbidden. The populist justification and *modus operandi* are based on the mayor's belief that, after the regime change, many arranged their lives around state aid ("they have put nothing onto the table of society") and the public money devoted to tackling the economic crisis was thus wasted. "I don't want to pay taxes so that irresponsible people spend it on alcohol, cigarettes, usury and gaming machines."<sup>8</sup> The mayor believes that the community has the right to control the use of public money.

Furthermore, the card is only accepted in five shops in Monok—three grocery stores, a second-hand clothing store, and a pharmacy. In addition to the restrictive populist principles of the poor, the business interests of the local elite also appear in the regulation of the needy. In the

<sup>8</sup>Hazardjáték: szociális kártya Monokon [https://hvg.hu/itthon/200934\\_SZoCIALIS\\_KARTYA\\_MoNoKoN\\_Hazardjatek](https://hvg.hu/itthon/200934_SZoCIALIS_KARTYA_MoNoKoN_Hazardjatek)

2009. augusztus. 24.

nine-member representative body, two members have ownership in shops where local people can spend their social support. The Citizens' Rights Commissioner has declared this local measure unconstitutional, describing it as unaccountable, arbitrary, and even infringing the limitations of social law, which unlawfully restricts the use of State aid.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Vision and Practice of Work-Based Society**

The populist social policy on inequalities and differences between people in need also builds on the fact that those with right-wing attitudes expect more stringent (non-subjective rights based) support, and right-wing ideologies stress meritocracy over egalitarianism. The commitment to conditionality also goes hand in hand with the rejection of welfare policies (van Oorschot and Halman 2000). All of these have been firmly embedded in the Hungarian welfare distribution framework, laying the foundations for a stubborn discourse on beneficiaries. The essence of communication is the loudness of the belief that the welfare dependence of many people has become a way of life, linked to the problems of "livelihood crime", the spread of deviant behavior, and the increase in social tensions. The ideological attack on social assistance has played a major role in the dramatic transformation of political discourse, especially visible in rural settlements (Zolnay 2012). Living permanently in deep poverty, long-term labor market exclusion affecting many generations is a daily reality for rural people. Reducing or abolishing social assistance and tightening access have reinforced poverty, dependence, indebtedness, and vulnerability to usury.

In 2010, the populist government announced a work-based society. The goal of the conservative social policy is to "get as many people as possible into the labour market" (Ferge 2017). For this, the former welfare system, including the pension system, the family policy system, unemployment benefits, and the aid system, had to be completely restructured and most social rights have become tied to work or other conditions (Szikra 2014).

The study by van Oorschot (2006) revealed central elements of populist culture in connection with the judgment of the deservingness of those in need. "Inadequate proof" is expressly needed to make one be judged unworthy (de Swaan 1988). Members of a community tend to accept that if someone can be held responsible for their own deprivation,

<sup>9</sup>In a similar context, Aaronson (1996) writes about the scapegoating of the poor in his article "Scapegoating the Poor: Welfare Reform All Over Again and the Undermining of Democratic Citizenship." This is also highlighted by Nancy E. Rose (2000) in relation to women in poverty in "Scapegoating Poor Women: An Analysis of Welfare Reform."

they deserve to be excluded from it and the community demands exclusion. And “affinity of identity” can play an important role in cases where poverty is associated with belonging to ethnic or national minorities (van Oorschot 2006). Rydgren (2015) demonstrates that uncertainty, fear or anxiety, and the desire for authority resulting from it are not solely due to financial reasons. In the traditional social order, those who are sliding downward, becoming more financially and socially unheard of, easily cling to the promise of a society as envisioned by populists.

The conservative welfare system and development projects are clearly aimed at preserving social differences, as resources from the lower social groups are continually allocated to the middle class and upper middle class through development policy, taxes, family benefits, pension systems, unemployment, and other social benefits. In the system of conservative social policy, social inequalities do not abate within rural society and the disadvantages of fragile rural areas are not reduced. In an idyllic countryside, traditions and trusted farmers are popular images in conservative ideology, but the populist state prefers, above all, political stability and finds no tools and resources necessary for integrated rural development. The transformed social policy and the political integration of society ensure political and social stability, but local societies are full of contradictions and conflicts of interests that the populist leadership can temporarily pacify but cannot solve. In most cases, direct tensions accumulating in the countryside are solved by the extreme practical application of populist ideology, further increasing the already profound conflicts.

### **Social Exclusion and Penal Populism**

Penal populism had a significant impact on the success of the conservative social policy keeping poverty under control. The main feature of penal populism is that the political elite continuously responds to complex social phenomena by simplifying them, promising spectacular and fast successes (Bartlett 2009; Shammass 2016). Populists, instead of addressing the serious relief of deeply rooted social situations, considered the expansion of social control, the use of unjustifiably stricter penalties, and the regulation of unacceptable behaviors to be the only political solution (Gönczöl 2013; Pratt 2007, 2008). The ruling elite uses the security deficit (Shammass 2016), which has become general, and misinformation of the general public for political purposes. Permanently intensified emotions that are constantly fed on individuals and constant anxiety favor popular decision-making on an emotional basis and make people susceptible to simplistic explanations and to the promise of quick and effective solutions (Gönczöl 2013). Personal merits and failures are

judged according to moral considerations, both in the individual and in the public understanding (Gönczöl 2013), which is communicated daily by the political elite through the media and appears in the messages of leading politicians. As a leading Fidesz member stated in 2011: "... someone who has nothing, he is worth exactly the same, I think. Whoever has not achieved anything in life is worth only that much, I can say that."<sup>10</sup>

The 2010, Fidesz government, invoking direct democracy and responding to the pressure of Jobbik voters and their slogan "let there be order," elevated criminal politics to the realm of high politics. The technical tools of penal populism have been applied not only to adults but also to children. As part of the most conservative school reform, in which primary and secondary schools came under state control from local governments, the compulsory school leaving age was reduced to 16 years. The age limit of punishability was lowered to 12 years for certain violent crimes. This was one of the suggestions in Jobbik's election program for 2010 that was taken over and duly implemented by government parties, and the complex system of social crime prevention was replaced by police control. A police presence was ordained in schools: one of the most symbolic changes was the introduction of school police in May 2013. The government initiative of December 2014 would have introduced a compulsory drug test for children in public education. Under pressure from public opinion, the proposal was substantially modified and, currently, the drug test service is only offered to parents. During the time these measures were introduced, child poverty increased to an extent never seen before in the modern era, putting nearly 40 percent of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. This was the result of the decisions and techniques of the populist government; with the reduced availability of support for people living in poverty, the conditions for access to it tightened, and regulations and controls increased (Cantillon et al. 2017).

The attitude of penal populism has had a huge impact on the social rights of the people in the lowest segment and on the chances of access, especially among rural and village populations lacking work and income opportunities, suffering from the greatest social conflicts, and suffering from poverty and ethnic tensions (Gönczöl 2013). The radical rhetoric of Jobbik and the intimidating presence of paramilitary groups in local/rural areas (the black uniforms of the Hungarian Guard marching through villages) further strengthened social tensions and some of the villagers joined such right-wing forces. The spread of the extreme

<sup>10</sup>János Lázár, Head of Fidesz Parliamentary Group 19.03.2011



right-wing political alternative was strongly linked to the anti-Gypsy rhetoric of the Jobbik party, which encountered wide receptivity among the rural lower middle and even upper classes (Feischmidt and Hervik 2015).

Openness and receptivity can be traced back to the need for justice and social order among the lower middle class of agricultural and industrial workers, some of whom have been deprived of work, life security, and (self-)respect. The needs of the lower middle classes regarding social justice and order are related to the demands of access to work and security of life, at the expense of others, even if they are Gypsies living in deep poverty (Feischmidt and Szombati 2013, 2017; Feischmidt et al. 2013). The other factor is the effort of the rural elite group, which is favored by a growing part of the population and is made up of partly agricultural and other entrepreneurs and partly of educated employees, to accelerate the development of the local economy. In the absence of economic resources, they wanted to build on their symbolic capital, most of all by referring to local poverty and to the crimes of the Gypsies in public speech (Feischmidt and Szombati 2013, 2017), in all this defining the Roma as a unified block. Because of this, among others, the discourse of local rural elite groups, ethnically addressing social problems, plays a decisive role in citizens' openness and responsiveness to the extreme right ideology.

Two important elements of Jobbik's social policy were poverty and the fight against the poor (Domschitz and Szikra 2018). In their programs, in their parliamentary speeches, and in their communication, social policy messages are thematically addressed through the topics of the "working poor", the lower middle class going down, inequalities, and insecurity. Their social policy ideas, meeting the ideas of the ruling conservative party, are linked to exclusion, primarily through the naming of social groups worthy of support. The "worthy" social groups are not only selected on the basis of need but (based on historical traditions) according to the moral, political, religious, and ethnic criteria preferred by the party (Szikra 2008). In 2010, Jobbik's program also recommended a nationally managed public work program, which was implemented in 2011 by the Fidesz government. The "work-based" society and the "job rather than benefit" principle are not a distant view for these two parties. The following two cases illustrate the consequences.

### **The Conflict in Gyöngyöspata**

In 2011, Gyöngyöspata became the center of interest after several dozen uniformed members of the Citizen Guard Association for a Better Future, linked by several threads to Jobbik and the forbidden Hungarian

Guard, “invaded” the village as a public show of strength and began to patrol the settlement, especially in the streets populated by the poor. This was justified by their view that the local Gypsies kept the Magyar population in fear; they claimed that thefts and attacks regularly happened and the elderly were afraid, even in their homes. The Jobbik president also held a demonstration in the settlement. It also caused tension that private individuals in the village took care of supplying and accommodating the paramilitaries, even, according to rumors, giving money to them in return for their services. Their presence was welcomed by the non-Gypsy population of Gyöngyöspata with great pleasure, as was their intimidating behavior toward the Gypsies. It caused additional tensions that the local elite, such as the headmaster and schoolteachers, also showed their approval of the presence of the guards and they were even involved in threatening and pressurizing the Roma schoolchildren with comments like “if you are bad, we’ll call the guards.” The school principal also participated in a torch-lit parade organized by the guards in the poor neighborhood.

The Roma reported extraordinary fear, anxiety, and a sense of persecution. The school-age children were afraid, so parents did not dare to let them go to school for several days. The Gypsies dreaded walking in the streets; the uniformed guards insulted them and made threatening movements (Commissioner for Minority Rights 2011). According to Feischmidt and Szombati (2013, 2017; Feischmidt et al. 2013), the case in Gyöngyöspata shows that it was not enough to set the Roma as a scapegoat to make the right-wing political alternative a success, but to this end, the far-right groups had to create a “state of emergency”, which both evaluated and made the traditional political responses to social problems impossible, and confirmed legitimacy of the radical law-and-order party’s action against the Gypsies, treated as homogeneous blocks. According to the authors, the local process was supported by a radical change in national politics and public discourse, the appearance of far-right organizations and media.

### **The Érpatak Story**

The mayor in Érpatak, famous for his radical far-right views and provocative exhibitionist behavior, led the village for 13 years. The village leader, supported by Jobbik and tolerated by the Fidesz governance, was replaced in 2018, after the majority had become tired of the increasingly embarrassing leader who took the village to bankruptcy. With this, the mayor’s “invention,” the “Érpatak model,” also fell, which had been a long-term program of social organization, in which the local population was divided into valuable and worthless people, allies and enemies, and

builders and destroyers. He developed a model for the harassment of the poor in order to respect the “weak Hungarian laws”; the model also included the establishment of a paramilitary unit called the Legion of Honour (Becsület Légiója). An important element of his system was to educate the Roma and, to this end, those carrying out official tasks, such as the mayor, the notary, the police officer, the tax adviser, the guardian, the field guard, and the nurse, had to work closely together. The whole system was infiltrated by three elements familiar from the Communist era system: an extensive network of informers, the harassment of those opposing the system, and systemic, continuous ideological education extends to every possible area of life. On the one hand, relying on the general managers of the public works (field guard, etc.), who supervised the work with a video camera in one hand and with Breathalyzer in the other. It was part of the regulatory model that he regularly reported the poor, especially Roma families he came into conflict with, to the guardianship authority and threatened to rob them of their children (10 percent of the children living in the village were removed from their families). The rural poor in Hungary depend almost everywhere on the local administration—either in the area of public work or concerning community-level social benefits, such as housing support.

The Mayor of Érpatak tried to promote and distribute his own model for years among the leaders of settlements sympathetic to law-and-order solutions. He was most successful when the mayor of Tiszavasvári invited him to his settlement to “set things right” in the two parts of the settlement where thousands of Roma live in deeply precarious conditions. The social situation of the progressively poorer, segregated population in the settlement has been deteriorating continuously since the change of regime. The notoriously extreme right-wing mayor of Érpatak pursued “voluntary policing” in Tiszavasvári, involving the Legion of Honour on behalf of the Jobbik mayor of the settlement. Two to three times a week, usually between 8 and 15 people went out to the Gypsy reserve and, during their visits, they investigated electricity thefts and reports of usury. Anyone who was found to be suspicious was videoed. Power from properties was disconnected one after the other (in a total of 300 households) in the slum following large numbers of reports to the police by the Legion of Honour of those suspected. Finally, the Court banned the Tiszavasvári “policing” program.

### **Conclusion**

In this study on Hungarian state populism, we explained and highlighted the structural roots of rural support for populism. The structural, institutional factors of integrating state populism and its rural support were

the focus of our research because, through their analysis, we anticipated results that were valuable beyond individual examples.

First, we have showed that, in Hungary, strongest political integration power is achieved through a conservative populist ideology and the control and successful manipulation of redistributive mechanisms. Since there are no alternative political interest groups, local leaders are using the populist ideology tools to validate the interest of local elite. With the power of the local development projects and social policy they maintain social inequality and social conflicts. The public work programs make it possible for those in power to handle local social problems based on ideology and to maintain the apparent social peace. However, on its own, the obligation to perform public work is not a modern and successful integration tool. We have resented a successful top-down social integration program through an example of a small town. This is a good example of how local political measures and identity politics can become the catalyst for social innovation. The success of the community social land-use program has assisted in making the stability of local (populist) political power.

Second, this study has shown that, to ensure political stability and its own power, populists' social policy preserves social inequalities and creates a difference within those in need between the worthy and unworthy, which has further worsened the life conditions of rural poor. Restructuring the ideology of the welfare system has added pressure to the aid system. Important aid was cancelled, whereas the requirements of other aid became so strict that they violate people's dignity. This has strengthened the addiction and vulnerability to local power and the oligarchy. The majority of the poor try to meet the applicable behavioral requirements, especially with regard to "public works". State and local government measures, such as the voucher system limiting and regulating consumption, infringe human rights and autonomy but this does not jeopardize the power of the populist political elite who "own" the redistribution and media monopoly. The lowest classes are afraid of losing state support; the lower middle class does not want to slip down and join the poor. Political output is support for the populist state, from which the livelihood of the two largest rural strata depends.

Third, penal populism makes social exclusion and conflict potential stronger. This has assisted in the dissemination of the toolset and success of the populist social policy. The extension of social control and the enforcement of strict sanctions have become one of the most important tools of the populists for dealing with social problems (successfully or otherwise). To influence people in poverty, they have used the promise of impressive and fast solutions to complex social problems.

The “order”-based society is an important part of this, in which the most obvious tool of populism was to make criminal policy stricter. This also meant coercive control of poor families’ children, but several populist social-political actions have indirect disadvantageous impacts on the children via their families (e.g., withdrawing subsidies). Some of the most extreme examples of punitive populism and keeping rural people in fear are depicted in our study.

The integrative power of populist social and identity policy, preserving inequality, social exclusion, and political neutralization of the lower classes are related elements of the political integration of rural society; the basic features of which and the dangers and challenges arising from its results can be clearly outlined.

The populist rhetoric before and after Fidesz coming to power after the financial crisis of 2008 proclaimed ambitious social goals: elite exchange, strengthening the national bourgeoisie, the model of a work-based society and eliminating unemployment, helping the middle classes, promoting conservative values against liberalism, and socialist past, state control, and illiberal political democracy. The EU development funds and the expanding GDP after the crisis did not provide enough resources to make populist principles a reality. Populist power has, therefore, built and operated a system of political integration of society that combines the elements of integration and disintegration, as well as the tools of economic stimulus and coercion and cultural and identity politics to ensure power and social stability. The basis for the political integration of society is the unequal distribution and accumulation of development policy and social policy resources away from the lower social classes toward the middle and upper strata, among which large numbers have become political clients. Among the middle and upper classes, those who do not share the values of populism also benefit from the transfer of development and social resources.

Disintegration is also an essential element of the social policy of a populist state, which contributes greatly to institutionalizing social inequalities and the immobility of lower social groups and to the obstruction of the activities of opposition parties. Opposition parties are virtually absent in the villages.

The goal of populist political integration is to maintain power and social stability, which is achieved in part by monopolizing the information sources of rural society, depoliticizing and replacing rural civic associations, and outsourcing the social and educational function of the state to churches. With the system of public works and economic growth, the unemployment rate has decreased significantly. The dependence of rural individuals and communities on external sources, mostly

redistributed by the state, leading to a new ethos of statism, is also an effective element in preserving stability.

Culture and identity politics, the reinterpretation and revitalization of peasant traditions, the environment and locality as values, and the “national” confrontation with the global, the multitude of cultural events and festivals that propagate all this mentally promote the integration and neutralization of those living in need.

It belongs to the portrait of populism, which we may have introduced in dark tones, that it has been successful in strengthening the middle and upper classes, which directly integrate rural society through their economic resources, their political potential, and their cultural capital. As a result of EU subsidies and economic growth, even the income and consumption of the lower classes have increased slightly. The support of state populism seems to be persistent despite enormous contradictions, social traps, and challenges. However, understanding populism as a working regime is what we recommend to its all researchers because doing so can also reveal the reasons for its success.

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